

Coffin-Athearn Stores
2 Union Street
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-906

HABS
MASS
10-N+NT
24-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

COFFIN-ATHEARN STORES

HABS
MASS
10-NANT
29-

Location: 2 Union Street (on east side at corner of
Salem Street, and west side of Washington Street),
Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Town of Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Occupant: Nantucket Historical Association

Present Use: Same

Brief Statement
of Significance: Two early nineteenth century stores, the brick
walls of which survived the Great Fire of 1846,
and the municipal building from 1836 until 1966.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

South part of building

Erected some time before 1836 by Thomas Coffin, who had
bought the land from Horace Gray, who prior to that had
bought it from Matthew Myrick.

1836 to date -- George Cobb, Esquire, Town Treasurer,
for the inhabitants of the Town of Nantucket, bought
it from Thomas Coffin for \$2500.

North part of building

Up to 1836 -- James Athearn owned land and building.

1836 -- Isaiah Ray bought from James Athearn for \$1750.

1836 -- Frederick A. Chase bought for \$2150.

1884 to date -- Town of Nantucket purchased the property
from Matthew, Sidney and Charles F. Chase, heirs of
Frederick A. Chase.

(Abstract, Records Registry of Deeds, Nantucket)

2. Date of erection: Both north and south parts of the
present building were in existence for some time before
1836, as shown by deed of the north part from James Athearn
to Isaiah Ray in 1836, which reads "the tract of land
with brick building thereon...bounded on the south by
the brick store erected by Thomas Coffin." How long before
this they were built is not clear in the records.
(Abstract, Records Registry of Deeds, Nantucket)

The map of the Town of Nantucket drawn by William Coffin, Jr.

in 1830 shows these two abutting stores.

3. Architect: Unknown.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: This building was originally two brick stores. A dividing brick partition wall may still be seen through broken plaster.
5. Alterations and additions: After the fire the buildings were restored to use, and when the Town purchased the north store in 1884 they were made into one unit. The map of 1858 shows the two buildings, labelled "Town Buildings," although at that time the Town did not own both of them.

In 1889 the stairway was put into the north half, throwing the space it formerly occupied into the room on the southwest; a partition was moved back at the same time to make more space in the same room. At that time also a portion of the room on Washington Street used by the Police Department was partitioned off for a "lock-up." Safes and closets were put in, and offices installed for the following Town Departments: Registry of Deeds; Tax Collector; Agent of Poor Department; Police Department; Town Treasurer; Town Clerk; Judge of Probate and Probate Office; Clerk of Courts, and Assessors. (Abstract, Nantucket Journal, March 28, 1889.)

In 1961 the building was ruled unsafe by the State Department of Public Safety, several serious structural weaknesses having been discovered. It was not until May, 1966, however, when the new Town and Country office building on Broad Street was completed, that the building was vacated by these departments.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The buildings were on the southerly edge of the area devastated by the Great Fire of 1846 and were badly damaged although the brick walls remained standing. Most of the Town records in the south part were carried to safety. After the Fire there appeared the following item in the New Bedford Mercury and also in the first issue of the Nantucket paper to be published following the conflagration, "Saved -- Brick Office, Custom House and Commercial Insurance Office, the walls of which stand perfect."

Offices of the Town of Nantucket were located here from 1836 to 1966.

- C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photograph in One Hundred and Six Views of Nantucket by John Henry Robinson, Washington, D. C.: Judd and Detweiler, 1911; three photographs in Scrapbook

Collection of Miss Grace Brown Gardner (microfilm in
Nantucket Atheneum).

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin
Nantucket, Massachusetts
August, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built prior to 1836, they are two of the very few early commercial buildings to survive the fire of 1846. The south store became the Town Building in 1836 and so is also a very early municipal building. These buildings were chosen because of their survival as types of structures associated with early town history rather than for their architectural merit. They were given by the Town to the Nantucket Historical Association who with the help of the Nantucket Historical Trust has rehabilitated them for use as the Association's Office.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The buildings are 34'3" wide at the gable end. The Washington Street or northeast elevation is 41'4 3/4" long (south store 21'6 3/4", north store 19'10"). The Union Street or southwest elevation is 41'9" (south store 21'5", north store 20'4"). The buildings are two stories with three bays at the end and a total of six bays on each side.
2. Foundations: Brick (as far as can be seen).
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Red brick walls, brownstone lintels and sills at openings have been painted white.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood joists on masonry bearing walls, vertical roof framing, no purlins. Iron disc washer at second floor level of north building, iron ogee washer below cornice at party wall on east and west elevation.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: None.
6. Chimneys: Three small brick chimneys, one near center on northeast slope, one opposite on southwest slope, one towards north end on ridge.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Three doorways from street on east

side, one in wider masonry opening than the other, (perhaps originally double doors). One doorway from street on west side in wide masonry opening has double doors which open to one side. Bricked-up wide opening from street on south side. Four doors have nine lights on top, two recessed panels below, one door has four recessed panels. Brownstone lintels and sills on all doorways, dressed stone has reeded pattern, sills have water cant.

- b. Windows and shutters: All windows reworked. Six-over-six sash on all windows, single hung, frames of simple wood moldings, brownstone lintels and sills restored on all windows, all stonework dressed with reeded pattern, formerly louvered wood shutters on all windows, none remain. Closed flat elliptical arch into space below first floor on gable end at southeast corner.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof covered with composition roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Corbel brick chevron cornice.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: None, small wood platform on roof and scuttle door.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Interior has been much altered from original as a result of rebuilding after the 1846 fire and because of changes from the original use. Originally the building was laid out with separate spaces, each to be entered from street. Plan indicates there may have been five of these, three in north building, two in south building. Now all but two spaces can be reached internally. Shape of each building rectangular; overall shape of combined buildings also rectangular. Buildings were joined together in 1884. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Originally the north store apparently was divided by masonry walls into three separate spaces, two to east, one to west, with access to each only from the street; this is still true except where south wall of west space broken through into south building. Marks in south wall of south part show location of original large window. The south store was probably divided into two separate spaces with access to the east space through east wall and to the west space through south wall. Two spaces now joined; also there are two masonry vaults, one on south wall of south building, other on north wall of north building.

- b. Second floor: Now double-loaded central corridor through both buildings, original condition unknown. Staircase now only in north building along south wall, original means of access to second floor in south building unknown.
- 2. Stairways: Straight enclosed stairs to second floor along south wall of north building, up to east. Stairs to attic at south end of second floor corridor, straight run up to south, patching in attic floor of north building where stairs, since, removed, probably went to attic.
- 3. Flooring: Wood, c. 3" boards on first and second floors, c. 10"-16" boards in attic.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, painted.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Second floor, most doors with four recessed molded panels, two long vertical panels above have lights. First floor, most doors with six recessed molded panels, two short top panels have lights.
- 6. Decorative features and trim: Trim around door and window openings, flat boards, lintels with slight pediment.
- 7. Notable hardware: None, double, loose joint cast iron butt hinges.
- 8. Lighting, type of fixtures: Modern electric, some disused gas fixtures remain.
- 9. Heating: At one time stoves, now gas space heaters.
- D. Site and surroundings:
 - 1. Orientation: Gable end to south, streets to east, south and west sides gave immediate access originally to stores, later to town offices. Buildings abut the brick sidewalk on three sides and the next building on the fourth side.

Prepared by George L. Wrenn, III
Nantucket, Massachusetts
August, 1966
July, 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of the 1966 Historic American Buildings Survey summer project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. This is the first project of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Director was George L. Wrenn, III. Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Photographs are by Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, July 1971.